

OCTOBER 2015

Freelancers in the U.S. workforce

Editor's note: This essay is part of a series being published to help commemorate the Monthly Labor Review's centennial (July 1915–July 2015). The essays—written by eminent authorities and distinguished experts in a broad range of fields—cover a variety of topics pertinent to the Review and the work of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Each essay is unique and comprises the words and opinion of the author. We've found these essays to be enlightening and inspirational. We hope you do as well.

We're entering a new era. For much of the past century, the 9-to-5 job has defined what most Americans think of as "work."

But that is changing—fast. More than 53 million Americans are now earning income from work that's not a traditional 9-to-5. That's 1 in 3 workers.

We are still at the leading edge of a once-in-a-century upheaval in our workforce. The freelance surge is the Industrial Revolution of our time.

The surge in freelancing is more than two decades old at this point. When I founded Freelancers Union in 1995, the term "freelancer" was still new and not well understood. Whether by choice or by circumstance, millions of workers in the intervening years have started working gig to gig, project to project.

In the past couple of years, though, we've seen an acceleration. Online work platforms, such as Uber, Airbnb, Etsy, and Elance, that connect workers directly to consumers and clients are completely reimagining the work relationship. Under the National Labor Relations Act, however, these workers and the millions of other freelancers are largely prohibited from forming unions.

There are a couple of strategies that labor and political leaders could use to deal with this change.

First, we could simply try to stop these platforms, declare them illegal, or argue that those finding work through the platforms are "employees" of the platforms and therefore eligible for the same protections and benefits as traditional employees. In fact, some states and countries are trying both of those approaches. So far, this strategy has seen limited success.

Or we could acknowledge and even embrace the dramatic shift in the workforce and focus on ensuring that these new workers have the support and opportunity they need in order to thrive. This approach historically has been the mandate of labor leaders.

The freelance surge is the Industrial Revolution of our time.

Unions of the early 20th century didn't waste their efforts by trying to stop the unstoppable shift from agrarian to industrial work. They looked at the new industrial-era challenges—deplorable working conditions, low pay, little security—and figured out how best to gather workers' power and address those challenges.

While many of the era's victories played out at the bargaining table, others were achieved by recycling workers' capital and building union-owned banks, housing, insurance companies, vacation camps, and more. It was solidarity in action.

Even among this new independent workforce, there's an opportunity to find that solidarity again. Freelancers across industries often have more in common with each other than they do with traditional employees in their own industry. Workers (especially younger workers) are increasingly comfortable in this new way of working, juggling multiple identities and even careers.

Still, Uber drivers and Handy.com home cleaners have many of the same challenges and fears as freelance accountants and graphic designers. Unpaid work. Uneven income. No unemployment protection. Lack of benefits or security. We'd be smart to look for ways that support all these workers in an economy where people are having new risks foisted on them.

What the new workers are realizing, though, is that the government still doesn't understand them. Our work policies are stuck in the 1950s.

For an answer to what we should do in the future, we should actually look to the past. In the 1910s and 1920s, workers realized that government can't (and shouldn't) provide the full support system. These social unionists wanted government to enable and empower them to do it themselves.

That's where the future is: ensuring "sustainable flexibility" for all workers—workers helping workers to transform the economy together, boosted by a government that understands, and provides reliable information about, their needs.

I'm often asked, "Is freelancing good or bad?" I always respond, "Freelancing *is*." It's our job in the labor movement to make this new way of working sustainable for all of us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Sara Horowitz is the founder and Executive Director of Freelancers Union.

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